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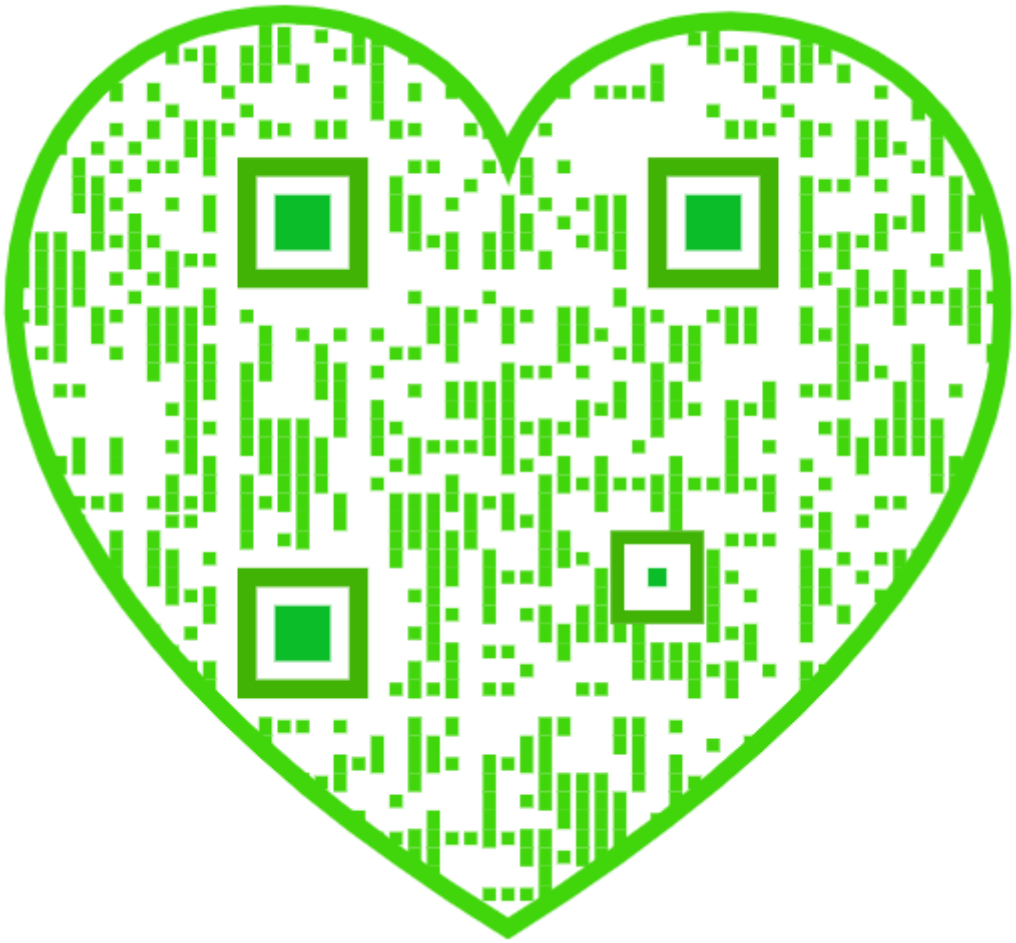

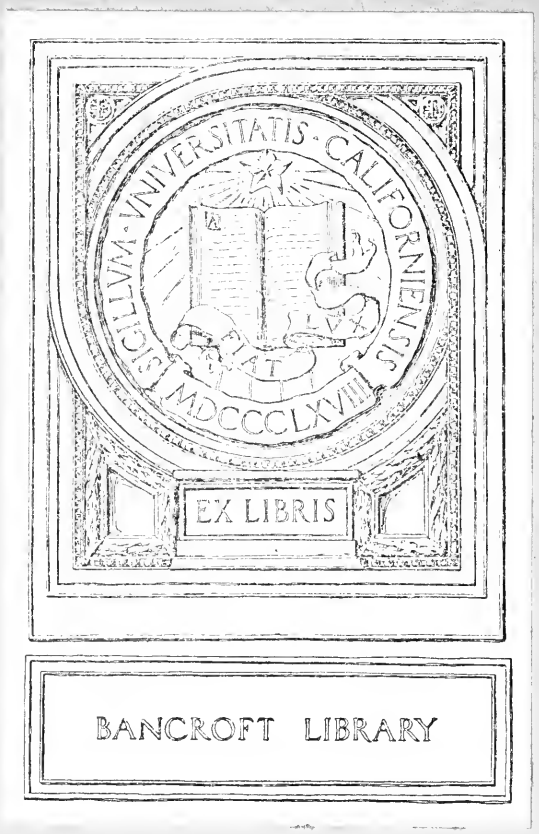

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LONG-DISTANCE RIDING.

1844-1933

By Captain Charles King, U. S. A.

THE long distance race between officers of the German and Austrian armies, last year, aroused no little criticism, on both sides of the Atlantic, because of the number of horses reported injured or ruined and the methods alleged to have been used to get all there was out of the animal before he dropped by the roadside, and now another ripple that may swell into a wave of popular protest is already going forth and hampering, if, indeed, it should not overwhelm, the proposed cowboy run from Chadron to Chicago—more than double the Berlin-Vienna course of the foreign horsemen of 1892.

Time was in America when nothing less than four-mile heats would satisfy the lovers of thoroughbred horseflesh, and the veterans still prate of the days of Lexington and Lecompte and the glories of the old Metairie. It was the privilege, yet hardly the pleasure, of the writer to witness the last great four-mile heats ridden over the Metairie in New Orleans; after seeing the breakdown of Conductor and the pitiable condition of such beautiful racers as Anna B. and Madame Dudley after their fight to a finish of sixteen measured miles, he was thankful, indeed, that it was the last. Racing of that character seems but a peg or two above cock or dog-fighting. Contests for supremacy that result in collapse are, or should be, things of the past, and it is one of the glories of the American cavalry that, however often it may have been called upon to make long-distance rides—frequently, indeed, to the rescue of beleaguered and imperilled humanity—the trooper and his mount have generally come in at the home stretch fit for business and full of fight.

It is the purpose of this article, not so

much to harp upon the cruelty or uselessness of the other system, as to illustrate, however faintly, the better points of our own. It may, at some far distant period, have been necessary for a courier to ride four hundred miles at top-speed on a single horse, but it is not likely to occur again. How many miles a light, athletic rider could cover in a day, changing mounts every five or ten miles, was a problem our pony express solved in the days before the Union Pacific was built. How fast a single courier could bear dispatches to distant commands, through storm and darkness, over river and mountain, changing horses only when by luck or accident he came upon fresh mounts, had many a famous illustration during the war of the Rebellion and our Indian campaigns of the western frontier. But the problem which is most worthy the thoughtful consideration of the cavalry leader is that in which, given a certain force of mounted troops at a certain station, he must decide how best to march it so that it may most speedily reach a threatened point and bring every possible man and horse into action.

GERMAN HUSSAR, LONG-DISTANCE RIDING.

Illustrations of long-distance racing are few in our annals. Illustrations of rapid and scientific marches are many. These were long-distance cavalry rides in the best sense of the term—dashes to the rescue of comrades surrounded by Indians, of detachments besieged, sometimes of captured women; sometimes a rapid rush to head off and overthrow a hostile force. In each and every one of these cases the problem was not only to make the most of every minute, to get to the scene of action in the shortest possible time, but to bring thither the bulk of the command fit for anything it might find at the finish. Compared with a problem of this character, the question of how to train or shoe or ride a single horse so that he may carry his rider over a given distance in the shortest time, sinks into insignificance.

Many are the records of cavalry dashes on sudden orders, mostly, however, for distances easily compassed within a single day; but there are two marches that for cool calculation, brilliant and scientific handling, have no superiors in our annals, and both of these were made by the same soldier, with practically the same command. In July, 1876, General Wesley Merritt, U.S.A., then colonel, commanding the Fifth cavalry, led a march that outwitted and amazed the finest fighters of the plains and drove the hostile Cheyennes in full force back to their agency, when in the midst of their career to join the array of Sitting Bull. In October, 1879, General Merritt led a battalion of the same regiment on a still more famous march—that to the relief of Captain Payne's command, surrounded and besieged by hostile Indians in the wilds of Colorado.

To follow the first march on the maps of the day would be a difficult matter, because the nomenclature of the maze of little streams flowing into the South Cheyenne, south and southwest of the Black Hills of Dakota, is utterly changed: Horse Head and Indian creek, for instance, seem to have exchanged places; and the five or six tributaries which go to make up the rather sizable stream known now as Hat creek, bore as many titles during the Sioux war of 1876 as we had scouts—the array of Sage, Box Elder, Cottonwood, Willow, Beaver and Dry creeks was confusing to the last degree. The Indian name for one of these streams, however, was the Sioux equivalent for "War Bonnet," and it was surmised, at the time, that the frontiersmen had shortened that into "Hat," as equally suggestive and less bothersome. But the War Bonnet as given on the maps of to-day is not the War Bonnet of the fight of July, 1876, but lies at least thirty or forty miles south of the scene.

In that eventful summer, the great agency of the Ogallalas, Red Cloud's band of Sioux, was near Fort Robinson, on the White river, while Spotted Tail—head of the Brulés—was among the hills to the east, some thirty miles away. Sitting Bull, with six thousand warriors at

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his back, was up in the grand range of country lying just north of the Big Horn mountains, where the commands of Crook, Terry and Gibbon were concentrating around him when the Fifth cavalry were sent up from Kansas to help out. Passing around the high bluffs north of White river, near Fort Robinson, a broad trail led from the Indian reservation northwestward across the intervening streams, traversed the valley of the Cheyenne a little east of the forks then known as the Mini Pusa (Dry Fork) and South Branch, and thence northwestward, past Pumpkin Buttes, to the Powder and Tongue river valleys. Over this trail, day after day, swarms of Indians were slipping away to join Sitting Bull, and the first orders of the Fifth cavalry were to march, by way of Fort Laramie, Rawhide Butte and Old Woman's Fork, to the valley of the South Cheyenne, keeping well to the west of this trail until we got to the timbered bottom of the main stream, and there to lurk in readiness to beat back any war parties and break up the traffic.

The advance guard reached the valley and found the trail early on Sunday morning, the 25th of June—just as Custer, with his fated column, was riding in to the attack on Sitting Bull's villages on the Greasy Grass (Little Horn), far to the northwest. Two or three lively chases sufficed to assure the Indians at the reservation that another route would be preferable, and they quit coming our way. Then the regiment was recalled, and, halting at an infantry-guarded palisade on the Black Hills road, about seventy miles from Fort Laramie and near the spring at the head of what was then called Sage creek, we heard, on the morning of July 7th, the direful news of the Custer massacre. On Wednesday, July 12th, under orders from General Sheridan, the Fifth cavalry started for Fort Laramie to refit, and then, by way of Fetterman and old Fort Reno, to go to reinforce General Crook. Camping at Cardinal's Chair that night, and under the lee of Rawhide Butte the next, we mounted on the morning of the 14th, expecting to go in to Laramie in one long march, and were surprised when headed eastward instead and led on down the Rawhide, which soon bore away to the southeast. Towards noon, General Merritt ordered halt and unsaddle at the crossing of the road from Laramie to the Indian reservation, and that "something

A HALF HOUR'S HALT.

was up" every man divined when "C" troop was sent away with orders to march to the Niobrara crossing, twenty-five miles away to the northward, and just so many nearer the agency where Major Jordan, commanding the infantry guard, had observed signs of mischief among the big villages of the southern Cheyennes. It was no quarrel of theirs; but the fearful success of Sitting Bull had so inflamed their savage nature that it proved impossible to hold them longer in check.

Promptly, Jordan got word cross country to Merritt, and the latter, seeing at once the gravity of the situation, instead of quitting the field, as his original orders required, "closed in," as his soldier conscience dictated. On Saturday, July 15th, just at noon, and in a whirl of dust, came a courier from the agency, sixty miles to the northeast. "Eight hundred hostile Cheyennes, fully equipped for the war-path, start at once to join Sitting Bull," was the word, and here was the situation in a nutshell. Riding away northwestward, these savage horsemen, probably the best in the world, would have a start of sixty miles, if Merritt pushed on to the agency and thence attempted pursuit. He did nothing of the kind. Their scouts and spies had seen him safely out of the Cheyenne valley and over the Niobrara, and reported him off for Laramie and out of the way. Therefore they could feel measurably secure. That the white chief could double on his tracks and throw himself across their path before they could reach the timber fringe of the Cheyenne, never occurred to them for a minute—yet that was just exactly what Merritt planned and did, and he had just seven troops, of about fifty men each, to back him. Always calm and methodical, he started on this soldierly mission with the same precision he would have displayed on a practice march. To meet and drive back these scientific fighters he must not only ride clear around them,—compass the entire arc, while they were traversing but a portion of chord,—must not only do it undiscovered, but must so do it as to bring every horse and man to the battle front, for, at his very best, they would outnumber him two to one.

A HALT FOR LUNCH.

It was just noon when the news came. Leaving a small guard with the wagons and ordering the quartermaster to follow, Merritt struck camp, sounded "boots and saddles," and by 1 P.M. we were marching back, along the Rawhide, in easy column of twos and at quiet walk, not more than three and three-quarters to four miles an hour. Fourteen miles up-stream and again under the lee of the sturdy old landmark, Rawhide Peak, we halted half an hour, watered in the clear brook, let the horses "pick a bit" at the Buffalo grass, then mounted again and followed our leaders, northwestward now, around the peak. By 5 P.M. we were heading square to the north, occasionally quickening the pace a trifle, but never so as to worry the rear of the column, always the sensitive part of a cavalry command. Darkness and we came down together on the broad valley of the Niobrara at just 10 o'clock. "Halt and unsaddle!" was the word, under the high buttes north of the Running Water (Niobrara), only thirty-five miles by the way we came; but horses had to eat to live, and we had nothing but grass to offer them, and not too much of that.

At midnight the wagons caught up. Three hours later, under the twinkling stars, every man was astir, the horses getting a good feed of oats from the wagons, the bipeds a hearty breakfast of bacon and coffee. Then "mount and away," still northward, still far to the west of the reservation, and, with the dawn, Merritt, on his big, swift gray, was making the pace for the column as we wound up the steep ascent to the divide between the Niobrara and Cheyenne basins. At this stage of the game we were fifty and the Cheyennes some twenty-five miles from the point where the Black Hills road,

A NIBBLE ON THE MARCH.

veering around now to the northeast, crossed almost at right angles the Indian trail from the reservation and the camps of Sitting Bull. Up, to the eastward, over the broad lands of the Sioux, rose the sun, as the long column came winding over the tumbling range, and on we pressed, hour after hour, until at 11 o'clock we halted, unsaddled and picketed around the palisade guard of the spring. Here men and horses had substantial lunch, and then came the longest stretch of all. Following close by the Black Hills road, east-north-east, over a rolling, treeless prairie, Merritt led the column, four and a half miles an hour now, at the very least, with only brief and occasional halts. A more rapid pace could hardly be ventured, because of the great dust clouds sure to hover over the column.

At sunset, far ahead, with the tumbling masses of the Southern Hills bearing almost eastward now, we sighted the winding fringe of green that told of cottonwoods along a stream, and the scouts, well out on our eastward flank, reported the Indian trail in view, with not an Indian on it. At 8 P.M., silent, dust-covered, but with every horse and man "on deck," Merritt ordered the unsaddling of his seven troops among the bends of the swirling stream, square across the Indian front—with the Cheyennes not ten miles away. Eighty-five miles had we come in thirty-one hours, without break or mishap, and every man feeling as full of vim as they who sang—

> With squadrons square, we'll all be there,
> To meet the foe in the morning.

Daybreak and the Cheyennes appeared together, and then came their turn for the "back track"—the most astonished lot of painted warriors it was ever my lot to see. It was in the first clash of outposts that their young chief, Yellow Hand, bit the dust, a victim to the superior prowess of our unequalled chief of scouts, Buffalo Bill—but that's an old story. So, too, for that matter, is that of the march; but it is one both Indian and trooper had reason to remember, and it was in the consequent race to the reservation only that the Cheyennes came out ahead.

Merritt's march to the relief of Payne's command should have a chapter of its own, and a worthier chronicler. Three troops of cavalry sent to the relief of an Indian agent were "corralled" on the Milk river, near Yellow Jacket pass of the Danforth range, in the northern part of what is now Garfield county, Colorado. Major Thornburg and several men were killed, dozens more were seriously and painfully wounded; almost all the horses were shot: escape was impossible. A daring courier had managed to slip out before the Indians fully encircled them, and after a desperate ride to Rawlins, on the Union Pacific road, one hundred and sixty miles away, wired the news. Captain Dodge, of the Ninth cavalry, scouting through the Park country, got wind of the disaster, made a famous and plucky ride with his "buffalo soldiers" and got safely in to share the fortunes and strengthen the hearts of the besieged, speedily having all his horses shot. These poor brutes could not burrow, as did their masters, making trenches in the sand and breastworks of the bacon. The sufferings of the four troops were severe, but nothing compared with the fate in store for them should relief fail.

On the morning of October 1st, a telegram reached General Merritt at Fort D. A. Russell, three miles out from Cheyenne. It was from department headquarters, briefly telling of the situation and ordering him to go at once, with every available man. He had only four troops left—"A," "B," "I" and "M," of the Fifth cavalry. At 1 o'clock away they marched, leaving scores of weeping wives and children, many of them in sore distress over the news already received. A special train was sent by the railway company to

transport the force from Cheyenne to Rawlins, where they arrived early on the morning of October 2d, detraining in the darkness. Then came the busy work of unloading supplies, forage and ammunition. A few brief hours of preparation and such sleep as the men could snatch, and at 11 A.M., on the 2d, Merritt's force was ready. With the same calm deliberation as before, he began his march over the rough and desolate country south of Rawlins, halting for brief rest of five or ten minutes at a time in cool cavalry style, but never unsaddling until within half an hour of midnight, when, with forty miles to their credit, the four troops bivouacked on Cow creek, close to the Colorado line. At eight the next morning, after feeding, watering and such grooming as could be done in the field, after substantial breakfast for one and all, the column marched again deliberately southward, through wild beauties of scenery they could not stop to admire. All day, from noon to near midnight, with but brief respite, on they steadily went, reaching camp on Fortification creek, in northern Colorado, having made fifty miles over mountain trails from their morning start.

Then came October 4th—the same deliberate preparation and start, no hurry, worry or fretting of horse or man, and this for good and sufficient cause. Seventy miles away lay their imperilled comrades, and Merritt meant to reach them before the rising of another sun. All day long, all the sharp October night, halting only for a few minutes rest—for the merest bite and sup,—the four dusty troops jogged on over a winding, rugged, rocky trail; Merritt often, as was his way, dismounting to lead, always "towing" his horse up or down a steep acclivity, every man, of course, following his lead; and at last, just before dawn, they reached the dim, shadowy valley in which, said their guide, their beleaguered comrades were by this time either dead or eagerly watching and waiting. Ever since the Sioux campaign of 1876, when, over a trackless prairie and in pitchy darkness, Payne's troop had been guided to the camp of its mates by the sounding of "officers' call," that signal had become a Fifth cavalry tradition. Knowing his colonel well—knowing that he would spare no effort to come to his aid—and believing it just barely possible that by the dawn of October 5th he would be within hailing distance, Payne and his comrades, fevered with wounds, thirst and the strain and suspense and peril of their week of siege, lay in their improvised trenches, eagerly, prayerfully waiting, like the besieged force at Lucknow.

> O, they listened, dumb and breathless,
> And they caught the sound at last,
> Faint and far beyond the Goomtee
> Rose and fell the piper's blast.

Then, indeed, was there wild burst of thanksgiving, in echo to the trumpet notes, soft and low, faint and far, yet telling infallibly of the march of Merritt and "the coming of the clans."

One hundred and sixty miles had the column covered since leaving the railway at noon on October 2d, and every man was ready for action when they reached the scene. Two horses had gone down with blind staggers on the march; one died from exhaustion before, and one after, reaching Milk river, and these were the only casualties resulting from that long-distance ride.

Another famous ride, on a somewhat smaller scale, but one of the traditions of the old army, was that made by Lieutenant Samuel D. Sturgis, of the First dragoons, when, in January, 1855, a party of Mescalero Apache Indians raided within twenty miles of Santa Fé, killing several settlers and running off some sixty head of mules. Sturgis, with only fifteen men, was sent in pursuit when the Indians had about eighteen hours' start. He and his party followed for sixty hours, overtaking the Indians at a distance of one hundred and seventy-five miles from Santa Fé, and in the fight that ensued killed three of the Indians, wounded several, recovered all the mules, except one or two that the Indians had eaten. They utilized every moment of light, and only halted when the pitchy darkness compelled them to rest until there was sufficient light to follow the trail. It won for Sturgis the thanks of the legislature of New Mexico.

As for individual rides, or long dashes with despatches or orders, incidents are almost too numerous to mention. One of the best on record was the exploit of Captain Charles F. Roe, now commander of Troop "A," National Guard of the State

of New York, but at the time a lieutenant of the First United States cavalry, stationed at Camp Harney, Oregon. It was along in the summer of 1869. An outbreak among the Indians near Fort Bidwell, California, was imminent, and the general commanding the department desired to send an officer whom the Indians knew and trusted, to counsel peace and patience. This was the commanding officer of Camp Warner, Oregon, an isolated station far over among the lava beds. The quickest way to reach him was by courier, and a dust-covered trooper rode into old Camp Harney, with orders for Major Otis to send the despatches he bore, with all speed, on to Warner—150 miles away, over desert and mountain. Major Otis was troubled; but his adjutant put an end to the worry. Lieutenant Roe said he could get that despatch over those one hundred and fifty miles as quick as anybody—and on him fell the responsibility. Taking only a sergeant and one private, with two days' cooked rations (hardtack and bacon) in their haversacks, Roe and his comrades started. His orders were to get to Warner as quickly as possible, "without regard to horseflesh."

CHARLES F. ROE MAKING HIS FAMOUS RIDE TO CAMP WARNER.

It was just eight when they jogged out of Camp Harney. The first twenty-five miles lay along the valley of Silver creek. Then came fifty miles, or more, of sage brush and alkali. Once clear of the garrison, Roe struck a trot and, maintaining this gait wherever possible, went on all night long, until 5 A.M., when he halted, unsaddled, and fed from the nosebags, in the middle of the desert. A tin mug of coffee and a bit of bacon was enough for him and his men. At six, they were away again, with the worst stretch of all ahead. No human habitation within fifty miles; the sand fetlock-deep; Warner Lake water densely alkaline, burning the skin from lips and mouth. Yet on they went, seven miles an hour, and rode into Camp Warner just at tattoo—8 P.M.—having made the one hundred and fifty miles in twenty-four hours; actual riding time, twenty-two and one-half hours. So far from being used up, Lieutenant Roe went on with Captain Hall, the commanding officer referred to, leaving his horses to rest at Warner and turn out for inspection next morning in prime condition.

This ride was made without previous special training of either horse or man—almost continuously at the "jog trot," through a desolate country, and just twelve hours quicker than experts at Camp Harney thought it possible to cover the distance and land the party, riders and mounts, fit for another brush the next day.

Another plucky ride was that of Lieutenant James F. Bell, now adjutant of the Seventh cavalry, through the Bad Lands of Dakota. Going into Medora, a little town at the crossing of the Little Missouri by the Northern Pacific railway, he found important despatches for his brother

officer, Lieutenant Garlington, then in the field, and, all alone, Bell rode away from Medora at sunrise on an August morning, covered fifty to fifty-five miles through the roughest country in the Northwest by noon, got a fresh mount in in Captain Varnum's camp, and just after sunset reached Garlington. The distance covered was at least one hundred miles, and the gait was trot or gallop all the way.

The records of the cavalry regiments on duty in Arizona or Wyoming during the Indian campaigns of the last twenty years furnish numerous instances of long rides of this character.

The annals of the great war have many more—perhaps the most remarkable being that of Henry Kyd Douglas, now Adjutant-General of Maryland, but at the time a young officer selected to bear despatches for Stonewall Jackson, through pitchy darkness, over river and mountain, from Harrisonburg in the Shenandoah valley, around Massanutten mountain, over the Blue Ridge through Swift Run gap, then by way of Stannardsville, Madison Court-House, Culpeper, and Brandy Station, to General Ewell, then "in the field." Douglas started just after sundown of an April evening, and in a pouring rain splashed through mud and mire and the blackness of Erebus over the mountain trail; exchanged his gallant blooded mare for a big, raw-boned racer some forty miles from the starting-point; used up mount No. 2 in a fifteen-mile spurt to Madison C. H., where he swapped him for a little gray which stumbled in the mire and darkness after a run of barely a mile, and could not be induced to rise. The magic of Jackson's name won him mount No. 4, who carried him nine miles and gave place to a gaunt roan. The next stage was the eleven-mile dash to Culpeper, where, in the faint, cold glimmer of dawn, the young officer reached General Dick Taylor, who steered him on to Brandy Station and beyond. Just twenty hours from the start, Douglas found General Ewell and delivered his rain-soaked despatches. He had covered the entire distance of one hundred and five miles in less than twenty hours, and the worst eighty miles of it in less than ten. Delays, due to loss of the road in one place and of the little gray in another, had made havoc with the record, after an admirable start. Douglas used five horses in all, Bell two, Roe only one.

SHORT NIGHT'S REST ON A LONG MARCH IN THE BAD LANDS.